Odyssey Dance Theatre

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Abstract
This paper attempts to examine a decade of ODT’s achievements and development within the changing local arts and dance environment. It also seeks to examine the challenges for a dance company move into a new phase of development in the context of social, economical and political changes in Singapore and the arts world.

Biography
Mr Danny Tan is an internationally recognised dancer and choreographer who founded Odyssey Dance Theatre in Singapore in 1999. His commissioned works have been performed in Asia and Europe.
Introduction

It is timely for Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT) to examine its ‘space’ in the next decade, especially when it has struggled to fight for its own existence and delivered a spectrum of art/dance works across a decade. ‘From its humble beginnings, the Odyssey Dance Theatre has become a leader in the field of contemporary Singaporean dance and has a fast growing reputation throughout Asia.’ (Kelly 2005, p.7). As ‘Singapore’s pioneer contemporary dance company’ (Tan 2009, p. 20) ODT has created a space in which to define its mission and objectives, to promote and express its works, as well as presenting its creative voice in Singapore and internationally. It is with this urge to continue to progress and prosper, to sustain and to evolve that ODT believes it needs to reflect and assess its achievements over the years, renew its energy in the arts and to create a new space in the new decade to enable ODT’s future aspirations. ODT has chosen to work with a broader framework with respect to social, economic and political sensibilities and believes that ‘the arts are not for arts sake’. The arts must serve the wider public interest, especially with ODT’s status as a not-for-profit with Institution of a Public Character status which means ODT can offer tax deductions to potential donors. ODT does not merely execute its artistic aspirations, our programs aim to nourish audience’s inner thoughts, and provided a new source of inspiration and a model for the arts industry. As an independent dance company, ODT has relied upon arts and business management knowledge to sustain its operations for 10 years. I believe the spirit of trying is an important thing and it is this philosophy that has propelled the company to push new boundaries in dance, balanced with sound business acumen.

ODT’s humble beginnings coincided with the launch of the ‘Renaissance City Plan’ by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in 2000, with the National Arts Council (NAC) as the key government agency to oversee the arts development and growth in Singapore. NAC is responsible for nurturing the arts and driving arts and cultural activities. It was during this period of public investment in arts that ODT made its main contribution to the cultural health of Singapore.

Founding of Odyssey Dance Theatre

Since 1999, ODT has aligned its strategies closely with its mission ‘a valuable touchstone for management and employees, helping to keep the company’s values and culture aligned, alive and well’. (Walling 2007, p. 49) As it aspires to be the foremost contemporary dance theatre in Singapore, ODT has evolved and experimented with contemporary theatrical forms and the multi-cultural aspects of Singapore’s heritage. This mission has revealed a strong sense of purpose at ODT and has allowed the public to understand direction and artistic aspirations of the company.

As the chief creator and prime mover of ODT, I have explored the amalgamation of different techniques and cultural backgrounds to portray the indigenous and rich heritage of Singapore. My works have consistently displayed my rich background in Chinese dance, combined with contemporary aesthetics in dance technique and form, thus providing ODT a unique voice in the region. This is clearly evident in the extensive showcase of original Singaporean works at ODT which have premiered in Singapore and abroad.

ODT Milestones

ODT was founded in June 1999 and incorporated in November 2001 as a Company limited by guarantee. In 2002 ODT gained charity status. As an independent full-time professional contemporary dance company, ODT has consistently delivered its objectives over the last decade, these are;

1. To achieve the highest standard of excellence and originality in the technical and creative areas of dance making.
2. To pursue the creation of an ever changing and dynamic body of work that provides a documentary voice for our time.

3. To provide an aesthetic and artistic environment in which local choreographers, dancers and theatre workers continue to strive and develop their craft.

4. To recognize and co-operate with the public and private organizations which support the local performing arts.

5. To respond to the needs of young people including young dance professionals.

Over the years, ODT has extended the parameters of dance through performance, research and experimentation. It has also presented and promoted the dance theatre’s works nationally and internationally to 16 cities in 13 countries and has supported these works through excellence in management and production values.

ODT Divisions

ODT International is one of the three divisions at ODT. To date, ODT International has presented some of the region’s emerging and prolific companies, choreographers and artists. ODT International delivers an array of international capabilities including the management and touring of artists and dance companies; development and operation of arts and dance festivals; consulting, advisory and event management work for artists, arts institutions and organisations and production of arts projects. ODT International has also focused on the creation, production and implementation of ODT’s diversified festivals such as DanzInc-International Dancers and Choreographers’ Residency Festival, Xposition ‘O’ Contemporary Dance Fiesta and Summer DanceFit Festival.

ODT Touring Work ‘Wings’

Combining the expertise in the international arts scene with our local network and resources, ODT International has created and managed its unique festivals of the highest calibre, and displayed capabilities as below:

- Artistic Policy Development
- Artistic Programming
- Performance Schedule
- Artist Contracts and Logistics
- Strategic Planning
- Festival Image, Branding & Ticketing Pricing
- Marketing and communications
- Multimedia development
Sponsorship Soliciting and Fundraising
Corporate Entertainment and Hospitality

With a focus on introducing ability-driven arts and dance education to students at a younger age, ODT has implemented sustained dance education programmes including Artist-In-Schools Programme since 2000. In 2003, ODT witnessed the birth of its Arts4YoUth Division. At Arts4YoUth, ODT pursues excellence in arts/dance enrichment, education and training with a mission ‘to nurture dance, movement and aesthetics through a personalised and student-centred approach’. ODT hopes to create an ideal learning and aesthetic environment to encourage individuality and creativity while developing teamwork skills. As we value the child and the role of dance in education, we aim to develop and provide resources of the highest educational and artistic quality. At the same time, we have tried to acknowledge, value and support other dance forms within arts. This division has provided varied dance training, development and arts/dance experience programmes which has continued to engage more that 2000 pupils annually, reaching pupils and participants from more that 65 schools and institutions in Singapore.

Arts4YoUth programmes

Through the years of arts education by ODT, many enriching programmes are conducted and are still being run at Singapore schools, including:
- Artist-In-School (AISP)
- Arts Education Programmes (AEP) for Schools
- Dance Elect
- Dance Camp
- Intensive Dance Programme (IDP)
- Short term Dance & Technique Workshops

Other community and public programmes such as dance workshops and master classes by local and international artists, Meet-the Artists Workshops and Young Artists Project are also well received.
The third division of ODT is the Young Artist Project Performers (YAPP) which was set up in January 2002. This division realizes one of ODT’s key objectives by providing a platform for local aspiring dance talents to present their works, and responding to the needs of young dance professionals. Talented youth with potential to contribute to the arts are offered scholarships which include consistent training in dance technique – contemporary, ballet, dance electives, repertoire and choreographic sessions. They are also groomed for ODT’s community and outreach programmes. YAPP continues to develop a more in-depth binding with the community through ongoing community/outreach performances, showcases and educational programmes.

ODT practises Corporate Social Responsibility in its services and programmes to the community at large. As a not-for profit entity, it has forged an effective bonding with the community by introducing ‘O’ Dance – a 10-part series across 5 years. As former CEO of Unilever, Niall Fitzgerald (cited in Walling 2007, p.45) states ‘Corporate social responsibility is a hard edged business decision Not because it is a nice thing to do or because people are forcing us to do it… because it is good for our business.’ (Walling 2007, p. 45)

Through ‘O’ Dance, YAPP scholars have showcased their talents and versatility at various community outreach programmes, performing new choreographic works by ODT’s resident and guest choreographers this has created a new dynamic youth voice in Singapore. Strong commendations were accorded to these young dancers for their professionalism and ability to bring refreshing works to the public at large.
In 2005, ‘O’ Dance has started to incorporate community outreach, dance education, arts education and arts appreciation into one single programme. Subsequent seasons have continued to introduce more vibrant new works by local youths alongside with YAPP, thus highlighting the significance of performing arts among young Singaporeans. With the formation of the three divisions at ODT, one may be able to understand ODT’s ambition in employing its diverse strategies in bringing arts to more people thus nurturing a sustainable dance ecosystem. ODT’s strategies naturally align with the aims of Singapore’s Renaissance City Plan III 2008—2012, ‘Arts Development Roadmap: Towards a Distinctive Global City for the Arts’ as outlined below:

- Driven Content Creation and Distribution
- Facilitating Internationalization and Enhancing Global Connectivity
- ‘Nurturing Talent, Developing Capabilities
- Developing Arts and Information Resources
- Engaging Communities
- Enthusing Children, Empowering Youth
- Advocating the Arts

ODT’s dance mission is to be ‘The foremost contemporary dance theatre in Singapore’ and this has been the driving force of our journey that has shaped and defined ODT’s focus and development in the last 10 years. The following points highlight ODT’s operating philosophy of strengthening areas which require attention and development in the fulfillment of developing a strong dance ecosystem:

- Arts Management and Professional practice
- Arts Creation and Promotion
- Arts education and Audience development
- Arts Consultancy and Partnership
- New Practices and Approaches in Creative Industries

**ODT— A Cultural Enterprise**

Since inception, ODT has worked towards self sustainability. Its independence has allowed the company to enjoy steady growth for a decade, responding to market situation and trends. ODT acts like an entrepreneur. With no model and guidelines, it strives its own mode of success. ODT aspires to adopt ‘corporate entrepreneurship’. It has sought a management model with four components as stated by Walling (2007 p. 79):

1. **Direction-** a company with strategy and goals
2. **Space-** a company that identifies freedom in arts business. It is ‘free from constant interruption and close supervision, given the time to experiment and refine their ideas’
3. **Boundaries –** a company that is able to define “the legal, regulatory and moral limits within which the company operates
4. **Support –** a company that provides ‘information systems, knowledge sharing programmes, training and development’

ODT believes in benchmarking and vision setting. It has constantly assessed its performance against other reputable local and international dance/arts companies such as the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan and Australia’s Expressions Dance Company. Constant field research is also undertaken to ensure that the company is always kept up to date with market trends and developments.
ODT gained experiences in its company organisation structure and practice from Australia, as there was no independent dance company in Singapore that it could model itself against. There were no available resources or guidelines as to what a contemporary dance company should be. There was no model of professional dance training and curriculum, or the possible prospect of full time dance artists and companies. However, ODT adopted whatever was suitable and appropriate to the company. ODT has been proactive in identifying and adopting new ideas to improve its own processes. This process has also provided ODT the competitive edge to withstand new challenges such as the global economic crisis and natural disasters and readily adapt to new demands and changes. ODT continued with its distinctive programmes and initiatives through the years against all odds. As a medium-sized dance company, ODT practices Mintzberg’s ‘adhocracy’, enabling ODT to be a flexible and adaptive organisation through a decentralized organisational structure. ODT has benefited from this understanding and has sustained its operations to date.

Artistic Voice of ODT—Branding

According to Ries and Trout (cited in Walling 2007, p. 31) ‘It is better to be first in the mind than to be first in the marketplace.’ ODT believes in branding as Saatchi and Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts (cited in Walling 2007, p. 31) states ‘Before, the mantra was to make the brand irreplaceable. That’s not enough today – it has to be irresistible.’ (Walling, 2007 p. 30) ODT has spent a considerable amount of time and finance marketing its brand as synonymous to ‘Singapore dance’. ODT has earned its trademark of ‘Innovation, Creativity and Precision’ by consistently delivering original Singaporean dance. Our aim is to be a household name in Singapore. ODT has also learnt the operating philosophy of empowerment. Our staff and artists need to be passionate about their work to produce the best results. ‘When we love our work, we need not be managed by hopes of reward or fears of punishment.’ (Benning 1993 cited in Walling 2007, p.75) Faced with unlimited resources and an uncertain economy ODT’s management strategy is focussed on the development of its own staff as a cost saving devise as Henderson (cited in Walling, 2007 p. 83) states the ‘more you do something, the less it costs to do it’ he goes on to underline the importance of acquiring management knowledge as an effective and efficient strategy of cost saving. This is especially true with the current global financial uncertainties. Arts and Business Chief Executive Colin Tweedy predicts ‘the worst is yet to come with 2010/11 being the low point’ (Lloyd 2010, p. 7). ODT has exploited its competencies and has managed to survive in this arts market in Singapore with its innovative way of operating. Walling states (2007 p. 37) that ‘core competencies open the way to many different markets.’ Withstanding unforeseen threats in the last 10 years, high profile activities were carried out against all odds. ODT has managed to access a wide variety of markets successfully. It has made significant contributions to the cultural health of Singapore by presenting high quality local and professional performances and services. Thus giving ODT a strategic edge over our competitors by making it difficult for them to imitate not only our artistic creations but our personalised and professional arts/dance services. Outsourcing is not new to the business world, however it is relatively new to the arts industry. ODT has seen this as an important step to cut cost and employ flexibility in cost and staff management. This has helped the company to further reduce its costs and produce better results. As a cultural enterprise ODT cannot afford to waste any resources on overheads. ODT needs to develop its enterprise model that has ‘a good balance of artistic aspirations and efficiency.’ (Christie 2010, p.9) ODT has demonstrated clearly that it has challenged the norms in arts and dance management by practicing and applying management control and business knowledge. It embraces a philosophy of ‘Think Global and Act Local’ and has set up its arts and business agenda that have proved successful for 10 years. It has also managed to work alongside Singapore’s vision ‘Singapore: The Global City in Asia’.

The Renaissance City Plan

The Renaissance City Plan was launched by Ministry of Information, Communications
and the Arts in 2000. It articulates a vision for Singapore to be ‘a world class city supported by a vibrant cultural scene.’ (MITA 2000, p.5). There are 3 phases to the plan:

2000 – 2004 : Phase 1
2005 – 2007 : Phase 2
2008 – 2012 : Phase 3

At this moment, Singapore is in Phase 3, building a ‘A distinctive, Global City for the Arts’. As by Edmund Cheng, Chairman of the National Arts Council outlines (2008 p.3):

The plan aims to usher in the ‘golden’ phase of the arts by harnessing our rich multi-ethnic arts and cultural heritage to produce distinctive works of arts that capture the imagination of the arts world. Anchored by the belief that the arts should not be a luxury for an exclusive minority, the plan also seeks to make arts an integral part of the lives of all Singaporeans.

Strategic Framework for the Arts Development Plan
(Source – Renaissance City Plan III Arts Development Plan, p. 17)
Singapore has come a long way in the development of the arts since 1938 as the following table demonstrates:

**Figure 1-1: Key Milestones in Arts Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Milestones</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>National Arts Council</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>Singapore Cultural Foundation</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>L'ESALLE College of the Arts</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Singapore Waters Festival</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Arts Education Programme</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Singapore Arts Festival</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Esplanade, Singapore Tyler Print Institute</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>The Arts House</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Singapore Season, Singapore Art Show</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Singapore Biennale</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>School of the Arts</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Renaissance City Plan III</td>
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**A Global City of Festivals**

With the opening of the Esplanade Arts Centre in 2002, more than 40 performing arts festivals have taken place in 2007. Certainly, Singapore has become a city of festivals.

**A Global City of Festivals**

(Source - Renaissance City Plan III Arts Development Plan p. 11)
Activities such as arts production and exhibitions have increased with ‘diversity in breadth and richness in depth of choices’ (National Arts Council, 2008 p. 9).

In order for Singapore to fulfill its dream of becoming the leading cultural capital in Asia cultural philanthropy and sponsorship will have to grow and the Civic District in the cultural sector needs to be positioned and rejuvenated as a premier arts and cultural destination. It may be with dismay that despite the hard work and investment in the last 10 years, Singapore is still being positioned at the lower threshold in terms of cultural development. Reporting on the Economist Intelligence Unit’s survey of 139 countries, where Singapore ranked 53rd, Straits Times journalist Jessica Lim stated that although Singapore ‘...scored well in terms of stability and infrastructure, but low on culture and environment’ referring to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s survey which ranked Singapore in 53rd position, comparing with the other 139 countries in terms of liveability.’ (2010 p. B2).

New Challenges Ahead

ODT has to continue its successful negotiation in the arts business and cultural spaces to maintain and develop the creation of contemporary, innovative and artistically vibrant work. ODT must continue to identify its core competencies and look forward globally. Globalisation is a ‘management idea’, as well as a ‘worldwide phenomenon’ (Walling 2007 p. 92). ODT will continue to advocate for the arts. It will continue to promote an independent decision making process. We will continue to foster new and risk-taking opportunities and enterprises. We are working towards a model of arts organisation excellence for Asian and global markets. We aim to be an arts leader with distinctive Singaporean works ‘driving content and distribution’. Certainly, we hope to strengthen our position as a Global Arts Ambassador by facilitating internationalisation and enhancing global connectivity.
In doing so ODT needs to be a local inspirer with multi-levelled anchored programmes to enrich the lives of Singaporeans. It needs to empower its youth and young dance professionals through nurturing talents and developing capabilities. ODT shares Kanter’s comments (cited in Walling 2007, p. 94) that ‘nearly, every industry is being opened up to some form of competition from outside the traditional territory.’ ODT must be able to counteract and compliment the new and ever-changing landscape of the arts/business sectors. Be it scarcity of funds, multiple and diverse programmes, threat from foreign and bigger arts organisers and players, escalating costs, economic uncertainties, limited avenues to promote in Singapore, ODT is differentiating its approach towards new developments in the creative industries. ODT needs to develop a new set of resources to help it to measure ‘artistic vibrancy’ (Christie, 2010, p. 9) In my recent interview with Christian Lloyd of Gig International Arts Manager, I shared my comments towards the possible development in the Singapore dance scene in the next five years.

The National Arts Council must see the importance of supporting Singaporean dance artists/companies which have proven their artistic merits and sustainability over the last decade. These strong-minded and committed artists/companies will provide new possibilities in dance expression, new platforms for local original works to be presented with high artistic and production values and audience reach, new ways to position Singaporean dance works and companies in Singapore and beyond. It is time for significant changes in Singapore dance development with prominent companies harnessing their own talent and niche initiatives. This helps to create a multiplier effect and edge. Successful models in dance are critical for Singapore to withstand international programmes and representation, with Singaporean identity strongly uphold. (2009, p.15)

**Conclusion**

In 2009 ODT celebrated its 10th anniversary and generally, ODT has succeeded in the last 10 years by sustaining its vision and mission with professional integrity and proficiency. It has overcome all obstacles to maintain its status quo as a respectable and professional dance/arts entity in Singapore and internationally it maintains its place as one of the leading dance/arts institutions in Singapore. It has braved the economic recessions, natural catastrophes such as SARS and H1N1, uncertain funding, as well as the fragile and unfavourable arts ecosystem in Singapore. ODT aims to harness its competitive edge, re-affirm its commitment to be a unique Singaporean voice, and differentiate itself by maximising its public goodwill and confidence with stakeholders. It also ‘signals’ to its audiences, that it will engage them through a more dynamic, contemporary and professional approach to doing arts business. In conclusion, ODT will continue to work towards being the foremost contemporary dance company in Singapore. Delivering the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy’s Inaugural S. Rajaratnam Lecture (2008) Republic of Singapore President S.R. Nathan said:

It would be a serious mistake to believe that we have already “arrived” or indeed, ever can, “arrive”. This is a journey with no end; a constant process of adaptation and striving for new capabilities to deal with new challenges.
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